

9. PUBLIC ACCESS AND RECREATION

An Interim Stewardship and Access Management Plan was drafted in 2005 for Ballona Wetlands (State Coastal Conservancy, 2005). This document forms the basis of the discussion provided below.

9.1 REGIONAL SETTING

The Ballona Wetlands offers a regionally important opportunity for the public to access and experience these environments. The project is owned by the State of California and public access is currently limited to authorized users and stewards. On-site activities must be consistent with CDFG's habitat protection mission, restoration and enhancement goals for the wetlands, existing regulations, wildlife needs, the safety of users, and must not have any adverse impacts on sensitive species and habitats.

As discussed in Section 8.1.1, the California Fish and Game Commission recently approved designation of Ballona Wetlands as an Ecological Reserve. This designation provides additional protection for rare, threatened and endangered species, as well as compatible public entry and uses. Authorized public use of the Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve includes educational tours and wildlife viewing trips, scientific research and monitoring, active recreational activities such as hiking, bicycling, fishing and boating (in Ballona Creek only), baseball, and habitat restoration.

Adjacent public land use also influences access and use of Ballona Wetlands. These include public beaches at Playa Del Rey and Venice, Marina Del Rey, Burton Chase Park, Del Rey Lagoon (a City of Los Angeles park) and a regional system of bikeways (e.g. the South Bay Bicycle Trail, the Ballona Creek Bicycle Path) linking the perimeter of the project area to the surrounding beach communities and residential areas. As discussed above, the site is adjacent to residential, commercial and some industrial land uses.

9.2 TYPES OF ACTIVITIES AND USES

9.2.1 Educational Tours and Wildlife Viewing

A number of community non-profits offer organized natural history tours, school field trips, and related environmental education programs within the project area. In addition, there is a self-guided interpretive tour along the perimeter of the Freshwater Marsh (located on Jefferson and Lincoln Boulevards). Informal wildlife viewing is also possible from a variety of periphery vantage points along Areas A and C, as well as within Area B along Jefferson Boulevard and Culver Boulevard. Formal wildlife viewing/interpretive features of Ballona Wetlands include a viewing platform within Area B, located on the berm overlooking the trestle along the old Pacific Electric causeway, and the self-guided tour established at the Freshwater Marsh.

9.2.2 Volunteer Stewardship Activities

Much of the existing interim management of Ballona Wetlands relies on volunteer stewardship efforts in conjunction with local organizations. Current projects at Ballona Wetlands are varied, and include some restoration of the back dunes and adjacent habitats within Area B as well as invasive species removal (e.g. chrysanthemum, myoporum, pampas grass, castor bean). In addition, some groups have conducted planting activities, placement of new trail markings, and trash clean-up. Most of these efforts rely heavily on the volunteer labor from community and school groups.

9.2.3 Scientific Research and Monitoring

Research and monitoring within Ballona Wetlands is undertaken by many individuals, groups and organizations. Activities include water and sediment sampling, tide-gate monitoring, and bird count surveys. Access to the site is granted through permission letter, easement, lease, or license agreement. An individual or organization may obtain a permission letter by submitting a written request to the South Coast Land Management and Monitoring Supervisor along with a detailed description of the proposed research. These proposals are reviewed on a case-by-case basis, and staff will determine the value of the proposed research along with any potential adverse impacts. In many cases permission will be granted via a written authorization from the region. All data collected must be shared with the CDFG. If the research would result in capture or collection of specimens, or any other activity that may be incompatible with the Ecological Reserve regulations, special provisions may apply.

CDFG also oversees a variety of ongoing and proposed research/monitoring projects in co-ordination with the City of Los Angeles Environmental Monitoring Division; University of California, Los Angeles; California State University, Long Beach; and University of California, Santa Barbara. Research topics include inventory of terrestrial invertebrates and responses to disturbance in sand dune scrub; inventory and measurement of the effects of disturbance on fish, crabs, snails, and birds, and development of protocols for assessing the diversity and abundance of wetland benthic invertebrates, fish, and birds by assessing larval trematodes in horn snails.

9.2.4 Active Recreation

9.2.4.1 Hiking

There are self-guided interpretive tours along the perimeter of the Freshwater Marsh. Currently, access to the remainder of the State-owned lands is authorized on a case-by-case basis, and these areas are not yet open to the general public. Unauthorized dog-walking (mostly off-leash) occurs in Areas A, B, and C, but has resulted in particularly adverse impacts in Area C. This is due in part to the higher site contours, resulting in limited area of wetlands (approximately 2.5 acres), poor or non-existent fencing, and the adjacent high density multi-family residential properties. Residences adjacent to Area B have immediate access to the beach. No residences occur adjacent to Area A.

9.2.4.2 *Biking*

Several formal bicycle routes are found near Ballona Wetlands with east-west bicycle access provided via an off-street (Class I) bicycle path along the northern levee of Ballona Creek, a north-south bicycle access provided via the Coastal Bicycle Trail, and bicycling routes along Culver and Jefferson Boulevards adjacent to Area B. No formal off-road or trail bicycle paths exist within the wetlands. Unauthorized off-road BMX bicycle and motorcycle use has been a management concern as jumps and tracks have been created within Areas A and C, with a substantial amount of damage to wetland habitats.

9.2.4.3 *Fishing*

Fishing currently occurs on both sides of Ballona Creek along the levees and from the pedestrian bridge crossing the channel.

9.2.4.4 *Water Sports*

Kayaking and crew rowing are common activities in Ballona Creek.

9.2.4.5 *Field Sports*

Playa Vista Little League plays baseball on three fields located in Area C.

9.2.5 Unauthorized Uses

There have been numerous homeless encampments within the wetlands, particularly in the upland scrub habitats in Areas A and C. BMX and motorcycle use within Areas A and C is also an ongoing concern. Because Areas A and C are both higher in elevation, have few formal access points, and are relative screened from established roads, they are prone to unauthorized use.

9.3 ACCESS POINTS

9.3.1 Access Points

Currently, the public, non-profit organizations, agencies, scientists, institutions and utility companies utilize more than 50 formal and informal access points into the wetlands.

Informal public access conditions vary between Areas A, B, and C. The perimeters of Area A and a portion of Area C are fenced off; however, unauthorized access into these areas is made through holes in the fence, unlocked gates, by jumping the fence, or entry through unfenced locations. Culver Boulevard and Jefferson Boulevard bisect Area B and much of this alignment is not fenced off, meaning that the interior of Area B is accessible from anywhere along these roads. However, parking in the immediate vicinity of Area B is limited and hence, informal access is greatly reduced. In addition, unauthorized activities can easily be seen from

afar because of the low growth of saltmarsh plant species. The dirt lot behind Gordon's Market provides an important informal meeting place and access point for hiking into the dune and saltmarsh areas of Area B.

Formal public access exists only at the baseball fields (from both Culver Boulevard and Ballona Creek) in Area C and along the perimeter of the Freshwater Marsh in the southeastern portion of Area B. Both locations provide legal parking areas.

9.3.1.1 Bicycle-Related

Within the project area, east-west bicycle access is provided along the northern levee of Ballona Creek via the off-street (Class I) bicycle path, while north-south bicycle access is provided via an on- and off-street (Class I and II) coastal bicycle trail. To enter the Ballona Creek bicycle path, bicyclists must use entry points at the end of McConnell Avenue, at Lincoln Boulevard (access here is dangerous), and at the end of Fiji Way. Culver and Jefferson Boulevards are also used by bicycles even though the conditions are challenging.

The City of Culver City is leading an effort to enhance and extend bicycle access as part of their Ballona Creek and Trail Focused Special Study. Upon implementation, this would improve bicycle access along Ballona Creek, providing a linkage to the Baldwin Hills Park area as well as other bikeways in Culver City such as Culver Boulevard, Exposition Boulevard, and downtown Culver City.

Bicycle parking is available at Fisherman's Village. Bicycle parking elsewhere is non-existent and often results in bicycles being locked to fences along the perimeter of the project area.

9.3.1.2 Public Transit-Related

Currently, there are six MTA bus lines, six Culver City lines, three Santa Monica bus lines, and three LADOT lines that operate in the vicinity of the project area (City of Los Angeles, 2003). The Santa Monica Big Blue Bus #3 and MTA Buses #108, #115, and #220 provide direct bus access to the wetlands. Bus stops near the project area are generally uncovered, do not contain informative or interpretive information regarding Ballona Wetlands, and do not include secure bicycle parking or trash receptacles.

9.3.1.3 Automobile-Related

Three regional freeways serve the project area. The Santa Monica Freeway (I-10) provides an east-west link to downtown Los Angeles. The San Diego Freeway (I-405) is the major north-south facility in western Los Angeles. The Marina Freeway (SR-90) provides an east-west link from the San Diego Freeway to Marina Del Rey. The project area is also served by a network of local and arterial streets. Major arterials in the vicinity that currently serve the project area are Lincoln Boulevard, Jefferson Boulevard, and Culver Boulevard, as well as occasional cul-de-sacs in multi-family residential areas to the west and north.

On-site parking includes two paved lots in Area A, an unimproved lot behind Gordon's Market in Area B, limited paved on-street parking along Jefferson Boulevard and unpaved parking in isolated areas along Culver Boulevard in Area B, and the Little League baseball fields in Area C.